F 144
.T7 C6
Copy 1

TRENTON'S

HISTORICAL ASSETS

Trenton's Historical Assets

BY

JOHN J. CLEARY

Read before The Trenton Historical Society
March 20, 1919

1919
The Trenton Historical Society
Trenton, New Jersey

F144
.F16

Gift
Society
DEC 13 1919

Press of
State Gazette Publishing Co.

TRENTON'S HISTORICAL ASSETS.

A city's assets do not consist alone of what figures in the tax ratables. Houses and lands, mills and factories, public buildings, personal belongings and the like are properly esteemed as evidences of prosperity, progress and wealth.

But as a well-built house does not of itself make a home, so something more than an aggregation of realty and industries enters into our conception of an attractive, desirable community in which to dwell. For instance, I may without fear of being challenged, I think, insist that the city with an interesting past has decided advantages over one that has grown up mushroom like, or if of mature age, has never been the scene of stirring events, the theatre whereon hardy ancestors performed deeds whose mention brings a flush of honest pride to the cheek of their offspring. "The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table" has told us of the difference between the self-made man and the man of lineage. The self-made man cuts an admirable figure in many respects, but as Dr. Holmes remarks, there is something appealing about the citizen who, other things being equal, can boast of forefathers with a record of distinguished service in behalf of humankind. The family parlor gains in attractiveness to the most democratic, the walls of which are decorated with portraits in oil of a few bewhiskered worthies who fought our country's early battles or helped to shape our National or State Laws in the long ago; or perhaps of a great grandmother or great grandaunt who took part, we will say, in the reception to Washington at Trenton.

What is commendable matter of pride in an individual, for greater reason supplies an ennobling impulse in a city, a state or a nation. We are justified in erecting monuments to our heroes; in carefully perpetuating such visible reminders of their times as survive in old churches, in old dwellings or any other work of human hands.

Trenton is blessed beyond ordinary measure with a history crowded with inspiring associations. The Battle of Trenton gives us fame from the Atlantic to the Pacific and even beyond the confines of America. Only within a comparatively few years, however, have we come to a substantial realization of the value of other evidences of our historic heritage. As late as 1876, when the country was aflame with enthusiasm over the centennial of our independence, this city witnessed without the slightest emotion the sale of the house in which Washington and his Generals held a Council of war that decided upon the momentous strategy of the Retreat to Princeton and its consequent glorious victory. Fortunately the Douglass House was not razed, but was transferred to new foundations, and it will be preserved through lately aroused patriotic effort.

The Quaker Meeting House near Princeton into which General Hugh Mercer was removed after being fatally wounded, has escaped unscathed to this day, and constitutes one of the most interesting memorials in this section. The Old Barracks on West Front Street which date back to the French and Indian Wars before the Revolution, failed to win the high esteem they deserve, when early in the 19th century they were cut in two to permit extension of West Front Street, and the premises were devoted to purposes altogether apart from their historic character. The present generation has awakened to a livelier sense of patriotic duty. The lamented General Wilbur F. Sadler followed up a suggestion given by Chancellor Edwin Robert Walker, and labored faithfully for several years with the result that the venerable pile has been restored and now constitutes one of the most interesting military monuments in the United States.

Slowly but surely a plan is being evolved for the suitable marking of the spot at which Washington made his famous crossing over the Delaware and under the impetus of patriotic men working at the Capitols at Trenton, Harrisburg and Washington, we will before many years see a magnificent park developed along either river bank with an imposing memorial bridge joining the two sections. The McKonkey

House at the Ferry and Bear Tavern two miles back from the river, both of which are associated with the memorable march, are still standing, and the scheme of those in charge of the Washington Crossing project includes, of course, the preservation of these buildings. Incident to this work, the route of the ragged Continentals will some day ere long be marked down to the graceful Battle Monument at the "head of town." It is easy to fancy that when all this program is finished, Trenton will be more, even than today, the Mecca for patriotic pilgrims from every state in the Union. Already the Blue Book has announced its purpose to include the roads between Trenton and Washington's Crossing in its list of historic routes for automobilists.

But I must hurry on, giving just a mention to the fact that many sites about town with revolutionary associations, have been marked with tablets, largely through the fine patriotism of our High School Classes. The route of the Continental army from Trenton to Princeton has been already marked by the Sons of the Revolution, and, in the same spirit, our energetic Mayor, Frederick W. Donnelly, has succeeded in having the old State Hospital Road named Sullivan Way, and he hopes before long to have Washington Way take the place of Scott's Road and Pennington Avenue in our local highway nomenclature.

I haven't time to dwell upon the important memorials such as Nassau Hall and Morven (the home of Richard Stockton, the Signer), at Princeton, the Friends Meeting House at Crosswicks, and many houses and spots of abiding historical interest at Bordentown, New Hope, and other places within the Trenton zone.

And now we come to consideration of another exceedingly interesting memorial, in some respects the most interesting landmark that Trenton has. The oldest dwelling in Trenton is Bloomsbury Court, on South Warren Street, the property at present of Edward A. Stokes. It is entitled to veneration not only because of its age, but also because of the high character of its original occupant and builder, and the many distinguished guests whom it has entertained, as well as because it is a fine specimen of colonial architecture.

Mahlon Stacy, founder of Trenton, and William Trent, from whom our city derived its name, have their memories entwined about the old place. Stacy owned the tract as part of his large estate, and through his son it passed to Chief Justice Trent by whom the present house was erected about the year 1717, two hundred years ago. It is of oblong shape, brick brought from England were used in the construction, and its four thick walls stand as straight and shapely today, as when originally raised by the conscientious mason of the early 18th century. I may say that the fine conservatory and frame building in front are of later origin, and should be removed in any plan of preservation which may be decided upon.

If there were no other claim than such as I have set forth, the house ought to be saved from the destruction now imminent unless the city intervenes. But in addition, Bloomsbury Court has been the home of three New Jersey Governors, its hospitable roof entertained Washington, Lafayette and other heroic figures of the Revolution, and its large drawing rooms are redolent with memories of the most charming society of Trenton both before and after the struggle for Independence. The interior is a fascinating study in itself. The imposing stairway, immense doorways, with ancient hinges and locks, quaintly carved paneling of the walls, beautiful paintings, gorgeous tapestries, old fashioned bed rooms and the large bake oven in the basement, all carry the visitor back to a more primitive, a more stately, and an easier moving life than we know of today. It surely meets the poet's description of a home,

"Built in the old Colonial day
When men lived in a grander way,
With ampler hospitality."

Are the people of historic Trenton willing to permit such a building as Bloomsbury Court to pass out of existence? A building that antedates even the old Barracks by nearly half a century! A building that forms so perfect a link between Trenton's earliest white settlers and our own day! (I might have told you that there is no question as to the authenticity of the history of Bloomsbury Court; we have

a perfect chain of title from the time the house was built down to its present owner.)

The present proposition, gentlemen, is not one merely of sentiment, sacred and appealing though that claim may be. The proposal that the city should buy this property is founded on good business reasons. The house can be utilized as a museum or a branch library which will soon be a Fourth Ward demand, or with its well-kept grounds it can be made a feature in our chain of neighborhood parks.

In a larger business sense, too, the project makes a fetching appeal. As I argued in the beginning of this paper, the city with a fine historical setting, with historical evidences of an interesting character, with monuments of an eventful past, possesses assets of a valuable nature, entirely apart from those which engage the attention of the tax gatherer. Such a city has something to divert the minds of its people from incessant application to grinding workaday cares, something to afford impressive object lessons in history to our children, to arouse local and national pride and so inspire a larger measure of that active patriotism that is so needful today.

America is full of examples of communities that have been quicker than Trenton to grasp this truth. Boston has its Faneuil Hall, its State House, its old South Meeting House and other shrines which inspire its citizenship and attract profitable visitors from near and far. And from Boston the patriotic pilgrim is led to Lexington and Concord, seats of stirring events in the times that tried men's souls. Longfellow's old home is one of the show places at Portland, Maine. In the same city, by the way, they preserve a private residence furnished after the style of the early 70's, which has educational value but not nearly to the same extent as Bloomsbury Court may possess for succeeding generations.

When it was proposed some time ago to raze the old City Hall (formerly the State House) in Hartford, Conn., a storm of protest went up from indignant citizens.

"To destroy or let it go to destruction," said the petition of representative citizens, "would be to inflict on coming generations an irreparable and unpardonable loss. It is not on the ground of sentiment alone that this appeal is made.

A due regard for the material interests of the city requires the preservation of this unique relic. Features like this are of far greater value than any price which can be put upon them merely as piles of stone, brick and lumber. They serve as reminders of past deeds and thus educate and elevate the citizens. But they also attract visitors, and looking into the future one can easily see how the preservation of this historic building will secure to the city an asset as real as is Shakespeare's humble home for Stratford, or Blarney Castle for the City of Cork."

The vandals, you will be glad to know, failed in their crusade. Last summer, when I visited Hartford, I found workmen busy, not in tearing down the ancient structure, but in restoring it to its original lines to be thus preserved as a sacred relic for all time.

And what was said of the Hartford building, is equally applicable to Bloomsbury Court in this city.

But let us run down the list a little further. Coming to Philadelphia, we have of course Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell, the Betsy Ross Home, and the William Penn House among other valued relics. Concerning the Penn House, I might remind you that when the original site down town, Philadelphia, was demanded through the progress of business improvements, those Quakers esteemed the little building so highly that they took it down brick by brick and re-erected it in a conspicuous spot in Fairmount Park; in fact you can see it from the Pennsylvania Railroad train as you cross the Schuylkill. And it isn't much to look at. It is a modest two-story brick dwelling, simple enough even for the original American Quaker to live in. But the recollections it inspires of Philadelphia's modest beginning and of the early settlers of the city, give it high rank among the assets of an intelligent population.

Other buildings connected with famous personages in our history are of course Washington's Home at Mount Vernon, The Hermitage (Andrew Jackson's home in Tennessee), and Monticello (the Virginia home of Jefferson). These and others like them are maintained as fountains of patriotism at which Americans may drink in fresh love of country. At

Baltimore, not long ago, the old home of Charles Carroll, one of the Signers, came into the market and the city bought it in for purposes of preservation. Richmond, Va., carefully saves buildings associated with the Confederacy. Savannah visitors are shown the headquarters of General Sherman during the Civil War as well as other interesting memorials, including a typical southern plantation in the suburbs with its slave quarters.

St. Augustine, Fla., the oldest city in the United States, attracts hosts of visitors every winter who enjoy not only its balmy temperature, but also its ancient fort, Cathedral and picturesque dwellings that date back into the time of Spanish occupation.

But I must not weary you with my recital. I might enlarge the list indefinitely, but enough has been said to show the trend of public sentiment in this field and that Trenton is blazing no new path in the attention that it has recently been giving to its historic spots.

Just a sentence or two about the oldest house at East Lynne, Conn., which was in danger of demolition a year or two ago. The Women's Societies of the State organized a movement that resulted in the purchase of the property, which had no particular historic significance, yet the conservative New Haven Register thought it worth while to say:

"For such work as this these societies deserve the highest praise and thanks of the people of the State. This house should become one of the shrines of Connecticut's discerning people."

Across the Atlantic it is the same story. One of the chief attractions for tourists before the war was the rich store of historic places, not alone those that recall military events but houses associated with the lives of men like Shakespeare, Dickens, Burns, Scott, Sir Isaac Newton, in Great Britain, and others of equal fame on the Continent.

I hope I have awakened your interest to the point that, if an opportunity presents itself before long, you will support with your signature and influence the petition to the City Commission for the preservation of Bloomsbury Court.

"A nation without visible historical monuments," says a judicious writer, "is without one of the most subtle and powerful influences of national strength and union; and there can be no poorer economy than the alteration or removal of such monuments for the sake of a few thousand dollars of income."

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
0 014 209 275 A